

Ahimsā

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A Survey of Early Buddhist Epistemology

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The Historical Context of the Early Buddhist View of Knowledge

The quest for knowledge has played a central role in the religious philosophies of India from the earliest times. The ancient *Vedas*, which form the canonical foundation for Brahmanical (and, later, Hindu) traditions, are focused on the spiritual power of knowledge. Indeed, the very word “*veda*” means “knowledge.” In the earliest portions of the *Vedas*, knowledge of complex cosmological analogies and identities revealed the divine forces that lay behind mundane appearances; knowledge thus gave control over these forces to the extent that both earthly and transcendent goals might be achieved. The *Upaniṣads* went even further in this direction and promised full spiritual liberation upon the realization of the ultimate cosmological analogy: that the true essence and identity of the person is none other than the source of all Reality (that *ātman* — the eternal self — is Brahman — the Ultimate Reality; that I am this All!). Thus, at the highpoint of Brahmanical philosophy, *to know is to be* and *to be is to realize* fully a metaphysical truth that is the key to spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*).

The early Buddhist view of knowledge arose against this Brahmanical background. In Buddhism’s earliest texts, collected as the Pāli Canon, knowledge is likewise philosophically and spiritually central. And yet the liberating role of knowledge in early Buddhism is not conceived as

an insight into a transcendent, metaphysical reality. Early Buddhist epistemology is distinguished from that of its Indian predecessors by the fact that the Buddha’s *Dhamma* (teaching) does not focus on realizing grand cosmological analogies or uncovering Ultimate Realities, because, from the perspective of early Buddhism, these pursuits are useless as a means for achieving the ultimate goal of religious liberation. Instead, it is the knowledge of the origins and cessation of human suffering (*dukkha*) — an understanding and control over the human mind — that leads to spiritual liberation. Thus, it is psychology, not metaphysics or theology, that guides early Buddhism. Spiritual liberation requires knowledge of the causal factors that shape human experience. For this reason, the early Buddhist texts, specifically, the Pāli *Nikāyas*, provide a detailed account of the way human beings perceive and grasp the sensory world. Even at the highest levels of knowledge, the Buddha claimed only the psychological knowledge that leads to the destruction of the factors that corrupt the human mind. As we will see below, such knowledge is an essential factor in the achievement of *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*) — Buddhism’s highest goal.

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Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original Teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the Teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāli sources.
2. To promote practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pāli language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

Dhamma Study Groups

The current Sunday morning meeting schedule is as follows:

- 9:00 AM: Basic/Introductory study group focusing on *The Noble Eightfold Path*.
- 10:00 AM: Meditation sitting.
- 11:00 AM: Intermediate study group focusing on *Just Seeing* by Cynthia Thatcher.

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This essay attempts to cover in broad outline the Buddha's views on knowledge — his "epistemology" — as they are expressed in the Pāli *Nikāyas*. The Buddha avowed many times over that the one and only reason for teaching was to show the way to religious liberation — that is, to help others free themselves, as he had freed himself, from the profound suffering (*dukkha*) that permeates human existence. Hence, the Buddha's views on knowledge are developed for the specific purpose of understanding and eliminating the causes of suffering. It is very important to keep in mind that the Buddha's *Dhamma* should always be understood in the context of this religious purpose. Whereas epistemology in modern Western philosophy has been in large part a reaction to the developments of modern science (which has its origins in the physics, astronomy, and chemistry of the seventeenth century), the Buddha was trying to solve what he saw as the fundamental spiritual/existential problem. Early Buddhism declares a way to spiritual liberation and happiness by means of a this-worldly knowledge of how the changing nature of the world and the response of the human mind to that world can be controlled and reorganized to avoid suffering. Knowledge, in short, is a crucial factor in early Buddhism because it is an essential component of the threefold training (*tiśikkhā*) that leads to final liberation: moral conduct (*sīla*), mental culture (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*).

Early Buddhist Epistemology: A Broad and Rich form of Empiricism

No doubt, any attempt to place a contemporary philosophical label on an ancient religious tradition such as early Buddhism has limited value. But, so long as we make the requisite qualifications, it does no lasting harm to use modern labels to characterize the Buddha's epistemological philosophy. In fact, it may well be useful in bringing the Buddha's ideas into the

contemporary philosophical conversation. In this light — and recognizing that further qualifications are in order — we can say that the Buddha was an *empiricist* in the sense that his religious philosophy was grounded on *experience*. Experience figures prominently in the Buddha's teaching in at least three ways: first, he taught that experience is the proper way to justify claims to knowledge — this is the heart of modern empiricism; second, the experience of suffering is the motivation for seeking a religious path in life; and, third, he provided a highly sophisticated psychological account of experience as a way of explaining how suffering arises, and how one might gain control over the causes of suffering so as to bring about the cessation of suffering. This account of human experience has a remarkably modern ring to it. Because of the Buddha's sophisticated analysis of human experience, early Buddhist epistemology can make a significant contribution to contemporary philosophy.

The Buddha's empiricism is also evident, perhaps uniquely so for a religious tradition, in the way he handled metaphysically speculative issues and the claims of religious authority. Whereas most religious traditions are based on metaphysically speculative doctrines — doctrines for which there is little empirical evidence (for example, the existence of a soul or the reality of heaven) — the Buddha told his disciples that one should believe only those doctrines that can be personally verified in experience. The Buddha reasoned that what cannot be verified in experience has little to contribute to the resolution of the religious issues that confront a person. Furthermore, the urge to speculate beyond what can be empirically verified usually derives from the ego's demands for security and self-aggrandizement. Reliance on religious or sacred traditions, or the mere authority of a teacher, is not an appropriate way to develop or justify a belief, suggested the Buddha, not even in spiritual matters where other religious traditions call upon "faith" (see MN.I.26.5).

Some scholars resist calling early Buddhism a

form of empiricism because the Buddha's view of experience does not conform to the simple sensation-oriented empiricism of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophers (such as John Locke and David Hume). But there is no reason to limit the conception of empiricism so narrowly. The Pāli Canon contains a remarkably rich and detailed psychological theory of experience. The Buddha's view of experience is much richer than the cognitivist views of experience that formed the basis of early modern epistemology in Western philosophy. In the early Buddhist view of experience, experience is more than just knowledge, more than cognition, and certainly much more than an aggregation of data points impressed on the mind by the processes of sensation. As we will see below, non-cognitive or affective dimensions of experience, such as feelings, dispositions, and habits, play an essential role in human experience, according to the Buddha's account in the Pāli discourses. But the fact that the Buddha held such a richer view of experience is not a good reason to reject calling early Buddhism a form of empiricism.

Knowledge Claims Require Personal Verification

Today, as in ancient India, there are many different religious traditions and philosophical systems. These various traditions or systems of thought offer very different views on the nature of reality, human nature, the goals of religious/philosophical life, and the means of achieving the goals of such a life. Unless a person is completely absorbed by a stubbornly blind attachment to a particular religious or philosophical tradition, questions will arise about which of the claims of the many religions (or philosophies) are true and which are false. Surely, the vastly different claims of the world's many religions cannot all be true. So, which religious traditions should be believed? What are the proper criteria for determining the truth in such matters? Compounding the problem

is the tendency of most religious traditions to claim to have exclusive ownership of the highest religious truth. No doubt, this issue remains a problem for any person who takes religion or philosophy seriously.

The "Discourse to the Kālāmas" focuses precisely on this issue, framing the problem in terms that apply just as much today as they did over two millennia ago. In this text, a group referred to as the Kālāmas approach the Buddha for help in sorting out the different religious claims professed by the various religious teachers who visit them. These teachers and sages make vastly different claims about religious truth and the practices necessary to achieve religious goals. Furthermore, the religious teachers not only promote their views as the only truth, but they disparage and heap scorn on the views of others who disagree with them. So, ask the Kālāmas, how does one know which one is right? What criteria can one use to determine who is telling the truth? Whom should one believe? On this, the Buddha instructed the Kālāmas:

[The Buddha said:] *In such cases, Kālāmas, do not accept a thing by recollection, by tradition, by mere report, because it is based on the authority of scriptures, by mere logic or inference, by reflection on conditions, because of reflection on or fondness for a certain theory, because it merely seems suitable, nor thinking: "The religious teacher is respected by us." But when you know for yourselves: "These things are unwholesome, blameworthy, reproached by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to harm and suffering" — these you should reject.*

But, Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves: "These things are wholesome, not blame-worthy, commended by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to one's benefit and happiness" — you should live undertaking these. (AN.I.191—2)

In this response to the Kālāmas, the Buddha demonstrated very clearly that his approach to knowledge is empirical (at least insofar as knowledge is considered as a *guiding belief*). The Buddha is making two important points here: first, that there should be proper *reasons* for accepting any religious or philosophical doctrine; and, second, what counts as a proper reason derives from verification in one's own personal experience. Most religious traditions, of course, hold that their scriptures or the pronouncements of their spiritual leaders are ultimate truths and should be accepted unquestioningly by the faithful. But the Buddha's approach is quite different. The Buddha disagreed with traditions that require unquestioning faith in scriptures or spiritual leaders. In "The Discourse on Threefold Knowledge," the Buddha gave a scathing critique of the Brahmins who claim to have a higher spiritual status based on specialized religious knowledge (DN.I.235—53). This discourse opens with two Brahmins arguing about which teacher knows the best way to "union with Brahṃā." To settle their dispute, they consult the Buddha, who, surprisingly, claims to know a path to "union with Brahṃā." Using arguments that could apply to many other religious traditions, the Buddha counters the Brahmins' claims to religious knowledge by emphasizing the fact that none of them has the requisite personal experience necessary to justify their claims. Precisely where many religions invoke a leap of faith, the Buddha stressed that one should use personal experience to verify claims to knowledge. So the gist of the Buddha's argument in this discourse is that, because neither these Brahmins nor their teachers going back seven generations have ever seen Brahṃā face to face, they should not make claims about religious matters that they have not experienced for themselves. By means of a number of similes, the Buddha led his Brahmin interlocutors to the conclusion that, without empirical support, the boasts of many Brahmanical teachers are no more than foolish talk. From the Buddha's perspective, knowledge

claims that rely on faith without the support of good experiential evidence are biased by one's likes/dislikes and cannot adapt to new evidence or situations. The Buddha insisted that such standards of empirical evidence apply as well to his own teaching, the *Dhamma* — a position that is highly unusual for a religious teacher. As Richard Gombrich put it, "the Buddha stressed that what gave him the right to preach his doctrine as the truth was that he had *experienced* its truth himself, not just learnt it from others or even reasoned it out". Thus, although it is permissible within the framework of the Buddha's teaching that the authority of the Buddha and the Buddhist texts may be taken as a starting point in the quest for knowledge, one should not attach authority to the Buddha's teachings as a matter of blind faith.

In another famous passage, the Buddha stressed the need for *personal* verification of claims about religious truth:

"Monks, do you only speak that which is known by yourselves seen by yourselves, found by yourselves?"

"Yes, we do, sir."

"Good, Monks. That is how you have been instructed by me in this timeless doctrine which can be realized and verified, that leads to the goal, and can be understood by those who are intelligent." (MN.I.265)

In this way, the Buddha's disciples were told not to take anyone's (even the Buddha's) word for a belief, but they should "come and see" (*ehi-passiko*) for themselves. The Buddha was critical of dogmatism of any sort. The intelligent person remains open to new facts and never considers the achievement of belief as final, unassailable, knowledge. This anti-dogmatic sentiment is clearly indicated by the Buddha in the following passage:

[The Buddha said:] Even if I claim to know something on the basis of best faith, [or likes or tradition or reflection on form or delight in views] that [claim to knowledge] may be

empty, hollow, and confused, while what I do not know on the best faith [or by any other method] may be factual, true, and not otherwise. It is not proper for an intelligent person, safeguarding the truth, to come categorically to the conclusion in a given matter that such alone is true and whatever else is false. (MN.II.170—1)

This is a remarkable approach for a renowned religious teacher who offers his own highly developed path to spiritual liberation. The Buddha stands out (perhaps, even alone) among religious teachers for his *anti-dogmatic* treatment of knowledge, including even religious doctrines.

But what standard should one use to verify personally a knowledge claim? Here, the Buddha instructed his disciples that a belief should be evaluated in regard to its consequences in actual practice. A belief counts as knowledge only if the belief guides action successfully in practice, more specifically, in one's *own* practice. This pragmatic maxim is stressed not only in the “Discourse to the Kālāmas” but also elsewhere in the texts, such as in the “Discourse to Prince Abhaya” (MN.I.392—4). In this discourse, the Buddha convinces Prince Abhaya that a doctrine should be measured by its usefulness (even if the doctrine seems unpalatable or disagreeable in the near term). One should look carefully at what sort of results are likely if one were to act in accordance with a belief or doctrine. A belief should be accepted only to the extent that it leads to wholesome and happy consequences. This has significant implications for contemporary Buddhist practice. The canonical Buddhist texts are certainly revered by Buddhists, but, if one takes the Buddha at his word, the texts are to be read critically and the teachings contained in them subjected to reflection and empirical assessment in practice.

The Buddha's insistence on personal empirical verification is welcomed by many in the present day, especially given the influence of the empirical methods of the modern sciences on contemporary epistemology. But the Buddha's

position raises several important philosophical questions. For example, are all aspects of the Buddha's teaching consistent with this anti-dogmatic, empirical attitude? Some might argue that the doctrines of karma and rebirth that are central to the Buddha's teaching are difficult or impossible to verify in one's own personal experience. The Buddha himself claims to have verified such doctrines using certain supersensory powers (the *abhiññā*, which are discussed further below), thus, he fully intended to offer an empirical verification of these doctrines even if the normal sensory faculties are not involved. Furthermore, do we really want a less dogmatic approach to our religious beliefs if such an approach diminishes a person's degree of religious conviction? An opponent might well argue that a dogmatic faith is required to motivate good choices under morally difficult circumstances or in a morally ambiguous world. The Buddha would surely find such a faith to be an impediment to the exercise of intelligence — that is, to the flexible and creative response demanded by a precarious and changing world.

Limitations on Human Knowledge: The Unexplained Questions (*avyākātā*)

Unwavering certitude about core metaphysical issues is essential for salvation in most religious systems. Most religions hold doctrinal positions on such questions as: “Does God exist?” “Is there an afterlife?” “Does the world have a beginning?” “Will the world end?” “Do human beings possess an immortal soul?” etc. In many religions, *knowledge* of the deepest truths about Reality, or about God, is itself the goal of the religious life. But this is not the case in early Buddhism. Early Buddhism is perhaps the only religious tradition that explicitly avoids taking a stance on speculative metaphysical issues.

There are many passages in the Pāli *Nikāyas* where the Buddha is challenged to give his view on ten metaphysical questions. In each case, he

refrains from giving an answer to such questions. These ten speculative views (*diṭṭhi*) are referred to collectively as the “unexplained” views (*avyākata*). In the “Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire,” these ten views are presented as five pairs:

1. Is the world eternal, or is the world not eternal?
2. Is the world finite, or is the world infinite?
3. Are the life principle (the “soul”) and the body identical, or are the life principle and the body not identical?
4. Does the *Tathāgata* (the Buddha) exist after death, or does the *Tathāgata* not exist after death?
5. Does the *Tathāgata* both exist and not exist after death, or does the *Tathāgata* neither exist nor not exist after death? (MN.I.484)

These and many other metaphysical questions seem to be the staple of religious life for most religions. But when Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether he holds one of these views, he replies: “I do not hold the speculative view that ‘The world is eternal; this alone is true, and any other view is false’” [and likewise for each of the other nine views] (MN.I.485).

A very important question thus arises: why did the Buddha refrain from attempting answers to these metaphysical questions? Are these questions answerable (in principle), but the Buddha simply did not know the answers? Or is it the case that the questions may be answerable, but just not relevant to the spiritual path? Or was the Buddha’s refusal to give answers an indication that the questions themselves are meaningless? Scholars have debated for more than a century the various interpretations of the Buddha’s reasons for leaving these speculative questions unexplained. Based on this debate, and from a careful reading of the texts, it seems likely that the Buddha had several reasons for leaving these questions unexplained. First, and most important, the Buddha states that such issues are irrelevant to living the religious life. He said to Vacchagotta: “These questions are not connected with the goal, with the *Dhamma*, nor with the

fundamentals of the religious life. They do not lead to aversion, dispassion, cessation, calmness, higher knowledge, and *nibbāna*” (MN.I.485). Second, as an empiricist, the Buddha recognized that the scope of human knowledge is very limited and such metaphysical questions fall outside that scope. As we saw above, knowledge claims must be justified by experience, but these ten views are beyond any possible justification in experience. Human beings, with our limited means of knowledge, are simply not in a good position to know whether the world is eternal or not, finite or infinite, etc. Thus, attempts at answering such metaphysical questions involve a kind of overreaching, even hubris, on the part of the one who dogmatically clings to particular speculative views. Lastly, the *motives* for raising metaphysical questions often involve ego-driven grasping and thus are a cause of suffering (see, for example, AN.I.83). If one thinks of the reasons *why* one wants to know answers to questions about the finitude of the world or about the afterlife, one realizes that in most (if not all) cases it is the ego that wants to know, either to satisfy its own aggrandizement or to quell its fears of annihilation. Thus, attempts to answer the unexplained views reinforce the obstacles to spiritual progress.

The very famous “Parable of the Arrow” (in the “Shorter Discourse to Mālunkyaṇaputta”) illustrates this last point vividly. In this discourse, a monk named Mālunkyaṇaputta refuses to live the monastic life under the Buddha unless the Buddha gives him answers to the ten unexplained views — the very same metaphysically speculative views raised by Vacchagotta. The Buddha replies to Mālunkyaṇaputta’s request by saying that he never promised to answer such questions. The Buddha then explains to Mālunkyaṇaputta the famous “Parable of the Arrow”:

Just as a person — having been pierced by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and relatives having procured a surgeon — might speak thus: “I will not have this arrow withdrawn until I know whether the

person who wounded me is either a nobleman, a Brahman, a merchant, or a worker.” — or might speak thus: “I will not have this arrow withdrawn until I know whether the person who wounded me has a certain name and a certain clan.” ... Mālunkyaṇḍita, this person would still be ignorant of those things and then that person would die. So, too, were any person to speak thus: “I will not live the religious life under the Exalted One [the Buddha], unless the Exalted One will declare these speculative views to me.” And still, these would be unexplained by the Tathāgata [the Buddha], and then that person would die. (MN.I.429—30)

The parable demonstrates by analogy that, just as the first priority for a person shot by an arrow is medical attention, not speculation about much less urgent details of the situation, so, too, the unenlightened person does not have the luxury to ask such frivolous metaphysical questions when the urgent task is the elimination of suffering. The Buddha’s point is that a person should focus his or her attention on matters proper to the path that leads to liberation and not on these metaphysically speculative issues.

At this point, we can address the question whether the Buddha claimed omniscience, as some later Buddhist traditions hold. In the Pāli *Nikāyas*, the Buddha denied that he was omniscient (all-knowing) (see MN.I.482 and II.127). In fact, the Buddha claimed to teach only two things: suffering and the elimination of suffering. The Buddha, as a person, is subject to the same empirical limitations of knowledge as everyone else. He was a perfected human being, according to the texts, not a god. The Buddha did not claim to have knowledge of a transcendent reality that stands behind the world of sense experience. Even liberating knowledge, an essential factor in the achievement of *nibbāna* — discussed below in the final section of the chapter — is not a god-like knowledge of everything. It is the knowledge of how to transform the mind in a world that is fundamentally changing — nothing

more, nothing less. This conception of highest knowledge does not require anything like omniscience, and this point indicates a clear contrast between early Buddhism and the Brahmanical quest for knowledge of an Absolute Reality.

A critic of the Buddha’s teaching may point out that the Buddha himself held certain views that cannot be empirically verified. For example, some might argue that the early Buddhist views on karma and rebirth are theories that cannot be empirically verified. This is not the place to sort out an answer to this criticism, but it is worthwhile to raise the question of the Buddha’s consistency on this issue, since it goes to the heart of the claim that the Buddha was genuinely an empiricist. One might also raise the objection to the Buddha’s handling of core metaphysical issues that holding speculative (empirically unverifiable) views is, in fact, required to live a religious life. No doubt, those who practice most of the world’s other major religions would want to argue that the religious life cannot be lived without such metaphysical commitments.

The All: Senses and Their Objects Define Reality

Because most religions and philosophies teach that the highest reality is transcendent (for example, Brahman, the Forms, or God), they must posit a mode of knowledge that goes beyond sense experience. But the Buddha tied his view of reality to his conception of human experience. For the Buddha, normal human experience is limited to what we can sense with the six sensory modes of experience (*āyatana*) — namely, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and “minding.” These modes of experience are processes that involve both the sense organ and the sensory object. It is for this reason that the early Buddhist texts refer to sense experience as having twelve “doors” — the six senses together with their objects. The importance of this point will become clearer below

when we see that the Buddha denied the self-subsistence of both the sense organs and their objects. Furthermore, such an account of sense experience is a functional or integrated account of experience that gives neither the sensory organ nor its object ontological priority.

The Buddha held that the senses and their objects exhaust the entirety of existence. This is a very bold claim when it is viewed against the Brahmanical background of the Buddha's day. In the short text entitled the "Discourse on the All," the Buddha said that sense organs and their objects are the "All," or everything that exists. No doubt, the Buddha's use of the word "All" was a deliberate attempt to parody the Upaniṣadic claim that the All is identical to the transcendent reality Brahman. In this very short text, the Buddha stated his position thus:

[The Buddha:] *Bhikkhus, I will teach you the all [that exists]. Do listen to this.*

And what is the all? It is eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes, body and tangible objects, mind and mental objects. This is called "the all."

Whoever would speak in this way: "Rejecting this all, I will declare another all" — would be engaging in mere talk on his part. One would not be able to reply to a question and, further, would come to vexation. What is the reason for this? Because that which one claims would be beyond the scope of (sense) experience. (SN.IV.15)

And so sensory perception (together with the supersensory modes of perception discussed below) is the basis for knowledge even in religious matters. Given this approach, there can be little doubt that early Buddhist epistemology is a form of empiricism. Here, the Buddha transforms the metaphysical conception of the "All" in the Upaniṣadic tradition ("All" = "Brahman") into an epistemological concept, an empirical limitation on experience and knowledge. The "All" is not

Reality (in the absolute, metaphysical sense) but the comprehensive range of possible human experience. As David Kalupahana put it, "to posit anything more than [this All] is a metaphysically speculative position that is engendered by a corrupt mind grasping after a self and ultimately leads to vexation and worry ... because such views can never be justified; they are 'beyond the sphere of experience' (*avisaya*)."

It must be kept in mind that the Buddha did not offer such an analysis of experience and reality for its own sake; rather, his epistemology serves his ethical and religious concerns. So later in the same text, the Buddha explains that, in a mind defiled by lust, hatred, and delusion, the "All" is burning — a metaphor for the fact that sensory experiences typically instigate a chain of addictive behaviors that inevitably leads to suffering. The alternative, suggested by the Buddha, is to abandon all attachment to sense experiences.

Given the Buddha's account of suffering and his call to abandon sense experience, it may appear that his general attitude towards sense experience is completely negative. To some scholars of Buddhism, the Buddha is recommending that a person abandon all sense experience. But a careful look at how suffering arises shows that sense experience in itself is not bad. In fact, a good case could be made that sense experience in itself is neutral — sometimes it leads to craving and attachment (quite often in the case of the normal, unenlightened mind) and at other times it can lead to wholesome experiences and actions (when the moral corruptions are absent). The senses are dangerous, specifically when craving (*taṇhā*, literally "thirst") is present in the mind. In the corrupted mind, then, the operation of the senses can mislead us both intellectually and morally. The senses give us a wrong picture of the world, and we are prone to act immorally because we do not fully comprehend how a desire for (or aversion towards) a thing will play out. We do not see a thing's true value. Thus, it is not sense experience that is abandoned — it really could not be — but only the unwholesome *attachment* to sense

experience that often occurs in the corrupted mind.

An Empirical Account of Experience As a Natural Process

One might ask why the Buddha thought that the scope of human knowledge is so limited as compared to other religious traditions. The reason for this lies in his detailed analysis of human experience. The Buddha offered a remarkably detailed analysis of human experience because his spiritual purpose was to understand completely suffering and its elimination. This requires an understanding of the processes of experience that lead to suffering and the knowledge of how to transform experience so that suffering no longer arises. This is not metaphysical knowledge — although a view of the changing nature of humanly experienced reality plays a part; rather, such knowledge is ethical or religious psychology. For such reasons, early Buddhist epistemology focuses not only on the justification of knowledge claims but on the psychological processes that comprise human experience.

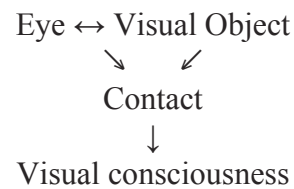
To understand the Buddha's view of experience, one must first take account of his view of the human person. Early Buddhism's most famous analysis of the person is the five aggregates (*khandhas*). In this account, a human being is comprised of five constantly changing aggregates (or processes): (1) the body (*rūpa*); (2) feeling (*vedanā*); (3) perception (*saññā*); (4) (pre-disposing) mental factors (dispositions to action) (*saṃkhārā*); and (5) consciousness (*viññāṇa*). None of these five aggregates forms a static, permanent essence (a soul or Hindu *ātman*). A person, then, is a complex arrangement of mental and physical/biological processes. It is clear that the Buddha was not a mind-body dualist — he did not claim that the mind and the body are metaphysically distinct parts of a person. Instead, he held that the person is an integrated, psycho-physical process. Although the Buddha spoke of the human person as a psychophysical personality

(*nāma-rūpa*), yet the psychological and the physical aspects of a person were never discussed in isolation, which is to say that he did not treat the mind and the body as distinct, self-subsistent entities.

The Buddha's analysis of experience must explain how experience arises and functions without reference to a permanent self. In the "Discourse of the Honey Ball," consciousness and experience generally are explained as a naturally emergent process:

Visual consciousness arises dependent on the eye and visible objects. The meeting of the three is contact. Dependent on contact, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one reasons about. What one reasons about, that one mentally proliferates. What one mentally proliferates, that is the cause by which mentally proliferated perceptions and (obsessive) notions assail a person in regard to visible objects cognizable by the eye, in the past, future, and present. (MN.I.111—12; cf. SN.IV.86)

This emergentist view of consciousness can be represented as follows:



The same pattern holds for the other five modes of consciousness (auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, tactile consciousness, gustatory consciousness, and mental consciousness). Each mode of consciousness arises because of the complex interactions of sensory organ and sensory objects. Conscious experience, then, is an organic/integrated process that can be analyzed into a coordination of both a sensory organ and the sensory object. But it is very important to realize

that neither the sense organ nor the sensory object is given a more fundamental status — they are functions delineated within an experience that is integrated as a unitary process.

This passage explains consciousness as a reflexive function that emerges from the complexities of human-world interaction. In other words, consciousness involves self-awareness. Consciousness, therefore, gives experience its continuity, but it does so without appealing to a permanent or transcendent *subject* of experience. Many might argue against the early Buddhist position here, saying that such a view cannot account for a personal identity that endures through time. But this is why the Buddha used the metaphor of a “*stream* of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-sota*) to illustrate how a changing process can maintain continuity and identity despite ongoing change.

Although the Buddha claimed that all knowledge is based on sense experience (or inferences based on sense experience), he did not claim that sense experience is infallible. The Buddha realized that sense data can lead to errors of fact and judgment. This is not due to a defect in perception, per se, but to the way that a corrupt (unenlightened) mind processes sense perception. The Buddha recognized the fact that subjective attitudes such as likes and dislikes, attachments, aversions, confusion, and fears prevent one from perceiving things as they are. Here, we see how subjective or affective factors, such as likes and dislikes, enter directly into the character of objects of sensory experience (and have the effect of distorting them). It is precisely because of the way the mind distorts experience in unwholesome ways that we need to transform our minds in radical ways through the development of mental culture and insight.

The Role of Affective Modes of Experience in Cognition

The Pāli *Nikāyas* show clearly that the Buddha

held a sophisticated and rich view of human experience in which non-cognitive or affective dimensions of experience are given a central place. According to the Buddha, all experience is shaped or constructed by mediating factors, many of which are affective. Put differently, human beings inhabit the world through such non-cognitive dimensions of experience as feeling (*vedanā*) and various underlying tendencies (*anusaya*) that operate on the affective levels of experience. This has important implications for the discussion of knowledge (or any form of cognition). The Buddha saw the cognitive and affective dimensions of experience not as opposed but as integrated aspects of all experience. This position is remarkably similar to mainstream cognitive science today and thus is an aspect of early Buddhism that bears on current research in the field of epistemology.

In the passage quoted above from the “Discourse of the Honey Ball,” it is said that “what one feels, that one perceives.” Such a statement shows that there can be no purely cognitive experience, because all experience is necessarily conditioned by affective factors such as feelings, dispositions, habits, and selective biases that are built into the very process of human experience. These affective factors color and shape and evaluate the objects of sense experience. All percepts are filtered or mediated objects dependent at least in part on human experience for what they are. In short, the world in which we live is shaped by the way we experience it. Sue Hamilton sums up this important aspect of early Buddhist epistemology in the following way:

all of the factors of our experience, whatever they may be, are dependent for their existence as that on our cognitive apparatus. This explains the famous early Buddhist expression “In this fathom-long living body, along with its apperceptions and thoughts, lies the world, the arising of the world, and the cessation of the world.” [Anguttara Nikāya, II.48] And this is why the factors of experience are referred to as

“conditioned things” — saṃkhārā. They are conditioned by us . . . all of the factors of experience are constructed or made like that by our cognitive processes. It is we ourselves who construct the world as we know it from the mass of sensory data we continually receive.

The fact that all experience is mediated by affective factors in the human mind makes it impossible that any human experience can provide us with a completely objective and unbiased view of reality. To some, namely speculative metaphysicians, this comes as bad news. However, the good news, from a Buddhist point of view, is that such absolute objectivity regarding reality is not necessary to achieve religious liberation. The Buddha was simply not interested in speculative metaphysics. He sought only a model of human knowledge and experience that would explain suffering and the elimination of suffering.

Although the Buddha’s analysis of *saṃkhārā* accounts for how we construct a world within our experience, the Buddha considered feeling (*vedanā*) as the most critical link in the unfolding of experience for the purpose of diagnosing and curing suffering. Feeling is *the key link (nidāna)* in the twelvefold formula of dependent arising because it is precisely where experience turns from a neutral process into an unwholesome one. According to the twelvefold formula of dependent arising, feeling causes craving (*taṇhā*). This is a shift from a morally neutral aspect of experience to a decidedly unwholesome aspect of experience that in the normal (unenlightened) mind eventually gives rise to suffering.

In the structure of experience, feeling signifies the affective quality that permeates a given experience. Feeling colors all the constituents within an experiential event or situation. Feelings are *not* so much localizable *things* as pervasive qualities that bind together the constituents of an experience and mark one experience off from other experiences. And, in the ongoing process of experience, such underlying aesthetic factors regulate the vector or direction of an experience.

That is, feelings of pleasantness often engender pursuit of the objects tinged with pleasantness, while painful feelings typically engender aversion to objects tinged with painfulness.

The Pāli sources emphasize that feeling, perception, and other cognitive functions are closely connected or intertwined. In the “Greater Discourse on Questions and Answers,” the Buddha said: “feeling, perception, and consciousness — these factors are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these factors from the others in order to describe the difference between them” (MN.I.293). Thus, in regard to seeing, hearing, and the other modes of perception, there is no such thing as perception or cognition *plus* feeling. The perceived object or thought is pervaded with the qualities of feeling. Here, the texts recognize that, even under normal circumstances, affective factors of experience play an essential role in determining our perceptions and other cognitive experiences. One might even say that feelings are neither exclusively *in* the experiencing subject nor exclusively *in* the experienced objects; they are as much a part of the things experienced as of the experiencer. In his translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, Bhikkhu Bodhi emphasizes this crucial point in a note about feeling: In the Pāli texts, feeling is “simultaneously a quality of the object as well as an affective tone of the experience by which it is apprehended.”

In response to such a view of experience, some might argue that the mediating factors involved in human experience obviate the possibility of genuine knowledge. Genuine knowledge, according to some philosophers, must be purely cognitive and achieve a high standard of objectivity. But all of the filters and complexities of experience on the Buddha’s model of experience might seem to make knowledge claims highly subjective so that the requisite standards for objectivity required by knowledge would be unachievable on the Buddha’s view of experience. Thus, the critic of early Buddhism might argue that the Buddha’s view of experience inevitably (if unintentionally) leads to skepticism. And yet, the

Buddha clearly tried to carve out a middle way on the issue of knowledge by avoiding the extremes of both absolute certainty and complete skepticism.

The Role of Knowledge in Achieving Spiritual Liberation (*nibbāna*)

Knowledge is an essential part of the path to spiritual liberation in early Buddhism. But, given the restrictions and limitations placed on claims to knowledge within the Buddha's empiricist epistemology, one might wonder what role liberating knowledge plays and whether it can be achieved in a way that is consistent with the Buddha's epistemological outlook. Put another way, what part does knowledge have in the achievement of *nibbāna* in early Buddhism?

When the Buddha spoke of the kind of knowledge that is relevant to spiritual achievement, he regularly used the phrase "knowing and seeing" (*ñāṇa-dassana* or *jānāti passati*). This phrase has a special meaning because it is a cognitive state that is caused by the development of "mental culture" (*samādhi*) that forms the second stage of the threefold training. When "knowing and seeing" is achieved fully, one attains a level of knowledge that is described as *paññā*, "wisdom" or "insight." This is the third and final stage of training. The texts make it clear that "knowing and seeing" refers to knowledge gained both by sense perception and by supersensory powers (*abhiññā*). Thus, the Pāli *Nikāyas* do not treat *paññā* as wholly distinct from knowledge gained through mundane perception. There is no mystical or transcendental mode of liberating knowledge, according to early Buddhism. This differs significantly from the Brahmanical forms of spiritual knowledge depicted in the *Upaniṣads*. In the *Upaniṣads*, liberating knowledge arises mysteriously and requires the intervention of transcendent realities or divinities. Whereas liberating knowledge in the Brahmanical tradition is a kind of grace bestowed on the meditator, the

early Buddhist texts tell us that all spiritual knowledge is a product of one's training, and therefore depends entirely on one's own efforts.

But what is the nature of liberating knowledge in early Buddhism? Liberating (or "highest") knowledge is presented in two modes in the early Buddhist texts: knowledge *how* and knowledge *that*. Liberating knowledge, according to the Buddha, is achieved by mastering the knowledge (*how*) that transforms the way the mind processes experience so that suffering does not arise and also by knowing *that* everything that exists is a dependently arisen (and so an impermanent) process.

Consistent with the order of the threefold training, the texts usually say that the knowledge that eliminates the corruptions of the mind is a prerequisite for the "final" knowledge or *paññā* that involves the realization of dependent arising. Not all of the discourses in the Pāli *Nikāyas* agree on this, however. And scholars themselves have debated whether the knowledge *how* or the knowledge *that* is the knowledge that leads directly to liberation from suffering.

Knowing how fully to eliminate the factors that corrupt a person's mind is the fruit, the highest benefit, of mental culture (*samādhi*). Mental culture, in turn, is achieved through the practice of meditation. According to the early Buddhist texts, one who meditates can develop powers that extend the normal six sensory modalities. Along with the six sensory modes discussed earlier, the Buddha recognized six supersensory modes of perception (*abhiññā*): (1) psychokinesis; (2) clairaudience; (3) telepathy; (4) retrocognition; (5) clairvoyance; and (6) the knowledge that leads to the destruction of the defilements. These are powers available to anyone who becomes adept at meditation. In this way, the Buddha recognized that each person has the potential to develop powers of perception and knowledge that go beyond the ordinary senses. Thus, these supersensory powers are not supernatural powers, but best thought of as extensions of ordinary human sensory powers that can be achieved by someone who has a mind that

is developed by meditative practices.

The supersensory modes of knowledge were used by the Buddha to probe deeper into the sources of human suffering. In particular, the Buddha used them to develop direct knowledge about the universality of dependent arising, impermanence, suffering, and the lack of a permanent essence (Self) in all things. The most important of the supersensory powers is the knowledge that leads to the destruction of the defilements. The defilements (*kilesas*) are the psychological factors of greed, hatred, and delusion that pervade the unenlightened mind. They distort our perceptions in unwholesome ways that lead ultimately to suffering. Eliminating the defilements has a positive effect on the mind as well. By purifying the mind in this way, the mind becomes supple, flexible, steady, and undisturbed (DN.I.76).

But just as normal sensory experience does not always produce true knowledge, likewise, any experience based on the supersensory modes of perception is fallible to the extent that they may be filtered through a corrupted mind. In fact, the Buddha thought that just such a misuse of these powers led the sages of the Brahmanical tradition to their erroneous beliefs about a permanent Reality (Brahman) and permanent Self (*ātman*). For the Buddha's purposes, the practice of meditation and the development of the supersensory powers have nothing to do with perceiving a transcendent reality. Rather, such powers of knowledge are aimed at eliminating the corrupting filters (the defilements) that distort our valuation of percepts in all forms of sensory experience.

In "The Discourse to Vacchagotta on the Threefold Knowledge," the Buddha said that the most important of these supersensory modes of perception were retrocognition (knowledge of one's former rebirths), clairvoyance (the power to see the rebirths of others as product of their karma), and the knowledge that leads to the destruction of the defilements (MN.I.482). These three higher modes of knowledge are referred to as

the "threefold knowledge" (*tevijjā*) (DN.I.235ff. and MN.I.481ff.). The use of the term "threefold knowledge" was no accident. In ritual practice and in later Vedic theology, "Brahman" came to be conceived as the god *Brahmā*, creator of the universe and among the highest *devas* in the Hindu pantheon. A theological form of salvation thus became available, namely, "union with *Brahmā*," a kind of beatific relationship with this highest deity. According to the Vedic tradition, one achieves "union with *Brahmā*" through the study and mastery of the "threefold knowledge," which referred to knowledge of the three Vedas. This is another example of the Buddha using a term borrowed from the Brahmanical tradition but reconstructing it in a radically different way. By redefining the "threefold knowledge" as powers that aid in the cleansing of the mind, the Buddha was rejecting theology in favor of psychology. Thus, according to this discourse, the knowledge that is central to the achievement of spiritual liberation is how to transform a person's mind by removing from it the corrupting factors that lead inexorably to suffering.

Some scholars reject the claim that early Buddhism is a form of empiricism because of these supersensory powers. Empiricism, some might argue, requires that all knowledge be derived only from the normal five senses. But there seems to be no good reason to stipulate such a narrow definition of empiricism. If empiricism is the claim that all knowledge is based on experience, and if the supersensory powers only extend normal sense modalities, there's no compelling reason to reject calling early Buddhism a form of empiricism. After all, the Buddha's discussion of these supersensory powers is not an abandonment of sense experience for a higher kind of experience. Furthermore, such powers do not reveal any ultimate truths about a transcendent reality.

The fact that the removal of the corrupting factors of the mind paves a path to such higher knowledge about the dependently arisen nature of existence is reinforced in the "Discourse on Right

View,” where the Buddha said:

When a noble disciple knows what is unwholesome, and the root of the unwholesome — and he knows also, the wholesome and the root of the wholesome — because of this knowledge the noble disciple abandons completely the tendency for lust, the tendency for anger (or aversion) and he removes the tendency to deceive himself into believing “I am.” By removing this ignorance and developing such knowledge, a noble disciple here and now brings suffering to an end. (MN.I.47)

The early Buddhist texts tell us that the catalyst for the Buddha’s achievement of enlightenment was his knowledge of *things as they really are* (*yathā bhūta*). This is what it means to be “freed by insight” (*paññā-vimutto*). Such is not an insight into a permanent or mystical reality, but the realization that everything (including each person) is a dependently arisen phenomenon (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), an unfolding process, and not a substantial entity.

As the Buddha said to the monks (*Bhikkhus*) in “The Shorter Discourse on the Lion’s Roar”:

Whenever, Bhikkhus, a Bhikkhu has abandoned ignorance and knowledge has arisen in him, then, through this abandonment of ignorance and the arising of knowledge, he no longer clings to sensual pleasures, nor to speculative views, nor to customary practices, nor to the doctrine that there is a permanent self. (MN.I.67)

This is a knowledge *that* (not a knowledge *how*), because it arises based on a deeper understanding of the changing world in which we live. Such liberating knowledge in early Buddhism does not stand opposed to normal everyday knowledge or perception but, rather, builds on it. When one sees things as they truly are, as processes and not as permanent things, one realizes the futility of grasping onto personal

possessions, sensual pleasures, and the fiction of a permanent self. Such knowledge leads to spiritual freedom, *nibbāna*, through non-grasping (*anupādā vimutti*) because, when one truly knows that there is nothing permanent anywhere, one realizes that one must “let go.” Given this, one thing is abundantly clear in the early Buddhist texts: *nibbāna* is not knowledge of a transcendent or highest reality, but a transformed way of living in this world. Even the highest kind of knowledge in early Buddhism is not an end itself, but simply a key factor in bringing about the needed transformation of the person.

The Buddha said that:

“when one dwells with one’s mind obsessed with craving and one does not truly know and see the elimination of such craving that has arisen, it is a cause of one’s failure to know and see . . . [likewise] ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and skeptical doubt are causes of one’s failure to know and to see.” (SN.V.127)

One could argue from this, and the previous two passages quoted from the texts, that there is a reciprocal relationship between the corrupting factors of the mind and the lack of higher knowledge about the way things really are. As we have seen, knowledge about the dependently arisen nature of the world and the person is required to remove the corrupting factors in the mind, but these same corrupting factors are part of the reason why a person fails to achieve higher knowledge. A person who is fully liberated is one who has achieved *both* the knowledge of how to eliminate the defilements *and* the penetrative knowledge of the dependently arisen nature of the world. Whatever their sequence or connection, both modes of knowledge are required to achieve *nibbāna*, according to early Buddhism. ■

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